

School Discipline

Should zero-tolerance policies be revised?

Two decades after the nation's schools began adopting zero-tolerance discipline policies to curb violence, drug use and gun threats, reform efforts are under way. New data on high rates of suspensions and expulsions are leading school officials to question whether zero-tolerance policies are being overused, especially when applied to minor infractions. Critics say get-tough discipline has disproportionately targeted minority and disabled students and created a "school-to-prison-pipeline." Encouraged by the Obama administration, many school districts are trying new approaches, such as behavior counseling. Advocates of zero tolerance acknowledge that some school districts have been overzealous but say schools are safer today largely because of strict discipline policies. Schools also are grappling with whether hiring armed security officers improves school safety or encourages higher student arrest rates. Meanwhile, civil liberties advocates question whether school officials can regulate off-campus misbehavior, such as cyberbullying, without infringing on free speech.

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Fairfax County police officer Joe Plazio monitors cafeteria activity at West Springfield High School in Northern Virginia. Recent school shootings nationally have prompted calls for more armed personnel in schools. Only 1 percent of schools had police in 1975; by 2011, nearly 70 percent had security guards or police, according to a poll of students.

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THE ISSUES

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 • Should principals be able to discipline students for off-campus behavior?
 • Should schools increase the number of armed security officers on campus?

BACKGROUND

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 In the 1990s, schools adopted strict policies requiring suspension or expulsion for all incidents involving drugs or weapons.
- 418 **Shootings and Bullying**
 Fatal shootings have increased pressure to keep schools safe.
- 420 **School Resource Officers**
 Security guards and police are a growing presence in schools.

CURRENT SITUATION

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 Nearly 70 percent of students say their schools have security guards or police officers.

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 "With trusting relationships, you have safer schools."

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